There's no bear in this story. I want to make that clear right from the start. We pointed our boots up the steep trail that morning hoping that we would not see a grizzly, and our wish was granted. But of course, you should be cautious about what you wish for.

It was last September, a blustery, wet day, and the omens were bad: The last time I had stood at this trailhead in Yellowstone's northeast corner, four years before, a man had come hustling out of the woods in glistening waders, clutching a fly rod and throwing nervous glances over his shoulder. He raced right past me, yanked open the door of his truck, and began shedding his river garb in hurried motions. I was preparing to head out for a solo trip up the valley, and I didn't want to ask him the obvious question. I knew what he was going to say.

I asked, of course. "It wasn't that big," he said. "Juvenile. Maybe two, three years old. Light brown. Along the creek."

That was all he said, but it was enough. I considered this description all the way up the valley, all that night, and all the way back down the valley, and now here I was standing in the same place, shouldering my pack, thinking about the bear I hadn't seen and the agitated man I had. I half expected either to come trotting out of the woods again, but neither did, so I told the story to my companions. One of the two had a bad foot, so I'll call him Stumpy. The other was a nervous sort — Jumpy.

The stories are the first sign that you are entering grizzly habitat. You can watch for claw marks, or learn to recognize their distinctive scat. But the earliest trace of a bear is always the story, which ripples out in circles, growing with distance and assuming powers and proportions beyond all reason. Bear country is not a habitat, or a physical place, or a line on a map. That said, we were headed right into it.

"Slough Creek is a good piece of habitat for grizzly bears," Chuck Schwartz, leader of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team in Yellowstone, had told me. "When you're there, you're in their realm. You know they're there. And they certainly know that you're there."

As we hiked up switchbacks for an hour, a light rain spritzing us, the qualities that make Slough Creek good bear habitat became painfully clear. The creek, filled with cutthroat trout, braided up the valley's golden floor. The valley began to open up, and the snowcapped peak of Cutoff Mountain came into view. A series of chilling, lonely cries wafted down from the fog-bound upper slopes — elk sounding each other out. Mule deer roam the valley, too, and bison, and pronghorn antelope, all food for the bears. Not that all their food sources are so mammalian. At certain times in the summer, 90 percent of some grizzlies' diets consists of
high-altitude moths, and in the fall they eat enormous quantities of whitebark pine nuts in the upper elevations.

Slough Creek is also good human habitat — one of the park's most heavily traveled backcountry areas. Scores of anglers work the lower meadows on a summer afternoon, sharing the scenery with through-hikers bound for Montana and horse carts trucking guests and supplies to the Silvertip Ranch just outside the park boundary.

Yet after walking for a while, we humans were absorbed into the landscape. Some hikers took pictures and then turned back. The trail grew quiet. When we did meet someone coming down, the conversation was always the same.

"Seen anything?"

"No, but ..." and then the story.

Only five people have been killed by bears in Yellowstone since it became a park in 1872, a fact that seems to have no impact on people's expectations and fears, or on our accompanying need for the inoculation of stories. The stories come in all shapes and sizes. There are explicitly political ones; as early as 1920, the governor of Alaska solicited testimonials from the public as a means of confronting "eastern conservationists":

Iditarod Sep 3 1920
Gov Thos Rigs
Juneau
Grizzly bear have been in my reindeer herd three times this summer, killing several deer, crippling others. I killed one grizzly in June. Another came July and killed deer but escaped. A black bear killed deer in August. Bear was shot. Have killed six bear round here this summer.

AH Twichell

Then there are the graphic tales that have steadily burnished the grizzlies' horribilis image — 1969's Night of the Grizzlies, the gory heart-stopper detailing the coincidental deaths of two women on the same night in Glacier National Park, or last year's Mark of the Grizzly, a comprehensive account of 18 incidents from 1977 to 1997. There are the literary classics: Faulkner's "The Bear" and Barry Lopez's Arctic Dreams. The movies: 1997's The Edge. And the scientific patter: My self-defense course had consisted of Thomas McNamee's The Grizzly Bear and The Great Bear Almanac, by Gary Brown. I had learned that grizzlies can see only as well as we Homo sapiens can and may charge merely to get a better look; that their sense of smell is far keener than a bloodhound's; that they usually flee the noise and odor of humans; and that, of course, coming between a sow and her cubs is the worst of ideas.

Yet by the time I reached the trail, I realized that all bear stories were variations on a theme — a means to revere what we fear. After the requisite "No, but ..." the hikers would launch into stories about bluff charges, and double bluff charges, and grizzlies in the camp at night, and what happened in 1967 on the other side of the state. We tried to laugh at these second- or third-hand close scrapes.
I'd brought Stumpy and Jumpy here precisely because of the bear. I'd told them that I wanted them along to dilute the fear I had felt going up Slough Creek alone, but that wasn't quite right. I didn't want it to be diluted at all. The truth was, I wanted to show them what I had discovered here four years before. I wanted to bring them up this valley and say, friends, this is fear — here it is.

Curiously, the only stories we didn't hear were the all too real ones, the ones that paralyzed me even in my bed in a distant city where the bear is only a metaphor for fiscal collapse. No one mentioned the Belgian tourist who'd been mauled here in Yellowstone three months before. No one mentioned Sarah Muller, who hiked up this same trail one July and ran into a mother grizzly who punctured one of her lungs, broke one of her arms, fractured seven of her ribs, and covered her with gashes. (She lived.)

*This* trail. The one we were standing on. This was a totemic spot if you wanted to be afraid of bears, which I did.

"Oh, forget about bears," one old woodsman told us that afternoon. "You could come up here for 20 years and never run into a bear."

This was true. It is also true that we were more likely to be killed by a falling tree or a lightning strike, and that, statistically speaking, the most dangerous part of the trip had been the drive to the trail.

Bears, however, are notoriously bad with statistics.

I said I wanted to be afraid of bears, which is bull. In fact, I am afraid of bears, chronically. But it occurred to me that I might as well have a reason. By hiking Slough Creek, I'd no longer feel like a coward. I'd feel like a justified coward.

My fear began with the first bear I didn't see. I was little, six or seven years old. We were with my older brother's Boy Scout troop on Virginia's Old Rag mountain and a black bear got into the camp. Black bears are supposed to be cute — harmless thieves of candy bars. In reality, half the people killed by bears in America are killed by black bears.

I remember the men rushing out of their tents and my bitter discovery that I was not old enough to go see the bear. I didn't even know what a bear was, except in that fuzzy, instinctive way we inherit in our genes. The men and some of the older boys — my 13-year-old brother included — went up and over the rock face behind the campsite. I remember my father taking a stone with him to throw at the bear. I remember standing at the bottom of that immense, passive rock, watching as my father and brother clambered up, over, and out of sight. I remember the dogs trembling and yelping with fear and excitement and blood lust, and I remember the men sounding much the same.

From 2 Kings 2:24: "And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them."
I remember being afraid.

As we hiked we kept an eye out for climbable trees, and for the first time in years I noticed the way the direction of the wind was revealed in the fine hairs on my forearms. We felt like prey, our senses alive with a keenness unknown in civilized life.

Stepping back into the valley was also a matter of stepping back into the food chain. Our body conceals dormant skills from a time when all country was bear country. The physical reaction to fear has many benefits: Fear produces adrenaline, which converts stored glycogen to sugar; our breathing increases, as do body temperature and heart rate; blood is diverted from the skin and stomach toward muscle. Fear helps prepare us for prolonged physical activity. Managed well, fear can be a tool of survival.

Grizzlies have their own tools, of course, chief among them that phenomenal sense of smell and a pretty good sense of hearing. Aside from quivering with adrenal afterburn, the best protection from an unexpected encounter seemed to be our trio’s usual combination of loud flatulence jokes and even louder flatulence. Jumpy and I argued over which of us could run faster, a moot point since bears are faster than either of us — a grizzly can sprint about 35 miles an hour. All that really mattered, therefore, was who was slowest, and with his busted foot, Stumpy was doomed. On the other hand, Jumpy informed me, I was both tallest and plumpest. "Hey, bears!" he called out at each blind spot in the trail. "He's the tastiest, eat him!"

There was no reply. We made camp in collective anxiety, patrolling a wide, slow sweep through the surrounding woods in search of fresh scat or cached carrion. We went back and forth over whether the tent was supposed to be upwind of the cooking area (so the bear would smell us and leave) or downwind (so the bear would not smell us and leave). In the end we gave up and pitched the tent under some climbable trees. We stripped off our smelly outerwear and obsessively hauled all our trash, our food, our clothes, and even our toothpaste ("Minty Fresh!" sounded like bear bait to me) up in the trees. In the darkness, Jumpy and I ran in our long johns around the trees, wrapping the food lines around and around, circling like faeries in a midnight rite of hope.

I slept with my father's old bowie knife by my head. Stumpy kept waking up, convinced he'd left a Mars Bar in his sleeping bag. Over the next two days the stove broke, the water purifier gasped and died, the candle lantern Chernobyled, the instant potatoes were soggy, the fishing was fruitless, and it rained. We were having a fine old time.

And still the bears did not show up. Yellowstone's 2.2 million acres comprise only a small part of the grizzly's 18-million-acre local ecosystem, and the bears move widely in search of food. Solitary, fond of rugged terrain, and often found under cover of woods, they are notoriously difficult to count from the air, and as we were discovering on our own, waiting around in meadows is not a great strategy for finding them either. Despite their welcome (in our case) absence, their numbers are increasing, though no two experts seem to agree on how many grizzlies there really are in Yellowstone — anywhere from 280 to 610. While humans remain their biggest threat, aggressive management has reduced bear mortality rates, largely through better education of hikers and hunters and better sanitation, so that bears are not
lured into harm's way. In fact, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is eager to remove the grizzly from the region's endangered-species list — as early as this year.

Whether that will happen, however, depends as much on bear politics as bear biology. Skeptics dispute Fish and Wildlife's healthy estimate (400 to 600 bears, with four to five percent population growth) and point to the many roadblocks facing the Yellowstone bears: their genetic isolation; the shrinking range of the whitebark pine, thanks chiefly to the 1988 fires; and, not least, development pressures, from planned subdivisions to new logging roads to oil and gas exploration throughout the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The question must also still pass through the grinder of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team and its bureaucratic partner committee, which put rival scientists and managers from three states (Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho), the U.S. Geological Survey, two national parks (Yellowstone and Grand Teton), and even estranged siblings like the Forest Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service under one roof.

Delisting the grizzly would be a major environmental coup. But the bears, say critics, wouldn't stand a chance.

The second bear I didn't see was deep in a Montana valley. I'd hiked up into Glacier National Park with some married friends. It was a few hours of hard work, most of it in the rain. We camped and fished and ate and went to sleep, and then, in the middle of the night, I heard something. The Marrieds were in their own tent; I was alone.

The sound was intermittent and very, very close. It woke me up. The tent vibrated as something struck the stays, and I heard teeth gnawing on the plastic case of my fishing rod, which I'd left outside.

"Uh, help," I said, and began yelling for the Marrieds. I was in full panic mode now. "There's a bear in the campsite!" I bellowed, but when we finally peered outside it was only a chipmunk.

The Marrieds giggled all night over that one.

We hiked down, following the trail through a copse of aspens with heavy underbrush. The path twisted and turned, so there was no warning. There was only a great, heavy thrashing, and then the grizzly. It was brown and fast, that's all I can say. I glimpsed it rushing off into the brush, its powerful back legs propelling it dead away from us with frightening ease.

So I lied. There is a bear in this story, even if it was only half a bear, and the wrong half at that. There's always a bear in the story.

The last bear I never saw was with us the whole way down, a chill on our conversation, a pinprick in our collective imagination. After three days of not catching fish and stinking up the valley, we'd had enough. We took our bags out of the trees and hiked down.

Jumpy walked point. At first I attributed this to some untapped reserve of energy, but then I noticed that none of us was making much noise. Our cries of "Hey, Boo-boo" and "Hey, Yogi" had all but ceased; the singing had dried up completely. Even Stumpy limped to the fore with
a determination that puzzled me as I labored under the weight of my pack. On the way up we had been a frightened herd of noisy prey, maneuvering to stay upwind of imagined bears. Now we padded softly down the trail, peering with anticipation into each aspen stand.

Jumpy, once jumpy, was now serenely eager. He approached each bend emitting a dutiful — but now rather quiet — cry of "Hello, Smokey." Rising to his full height, he looked over each hill with an expression I could not mistake: desire.

Somewhere in our three-day trip, the anticipation that accompanies fear — that gives fear its power — had overwhelmed us. The thin line dividing dread from hope had moved, gently but obviously, and desire had surfaced from under the receding tide of fear. "I actually want to see something," Jumpy finally admitted.

"From far away," he added hastily.

When we reached the trailhead and finally slipped off our packs and undid our boot laces and stood lightly amid the ordinary, we discussed the poor fishing and the bad weather and the worse oatmeal and the bear we had not seen, the one that had eaten us a thousand times in our waking dreams.

We agreed, without discussion, to make reservations for next year right away.